

**HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION
CITY LANDMARK DESIGNATION
STAFF REPORT**

**KEM WEBER BUILDING
1301-1303A STATE STREET
SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA
APN 039-131-013, 039-131-014, and 039-131-015**

Background:

Constructed in 1951, and designed by internationally recognized industrial designer Kem Weber and architect Roy Cheesman, the building at 1301-1303A State Street embodies the design motifs of the Streamline Moderne style. Though Cheesman is listed as the architect of the building with three storefronts, Weber can be considered the primary designer, which is in keeping with his industrial aesthetic and postwar interpretation of the Streamline Moderne style. The interior of the Christian Science Reading Room, an assured rendition of the



Modernist style, also represents the work of Weber. The building sits facing the corner of State and Victoria Streets with a sleek and iconic metal-rimmed, rounded canopy.

A Historic Structures Sites report prepared by Post/Hazeltine Associates was accepted by the Historic Landmarks Commission in 2010 and is summarized in this staff report. The report determined that the building, which retains almost all of its original design and materials, is eligible for listing as a City Landmark, as a rare example in Santa Barbara of postwar Streamline Moderne style and as the work of the internationally renowned architect and designer Kem Weber.

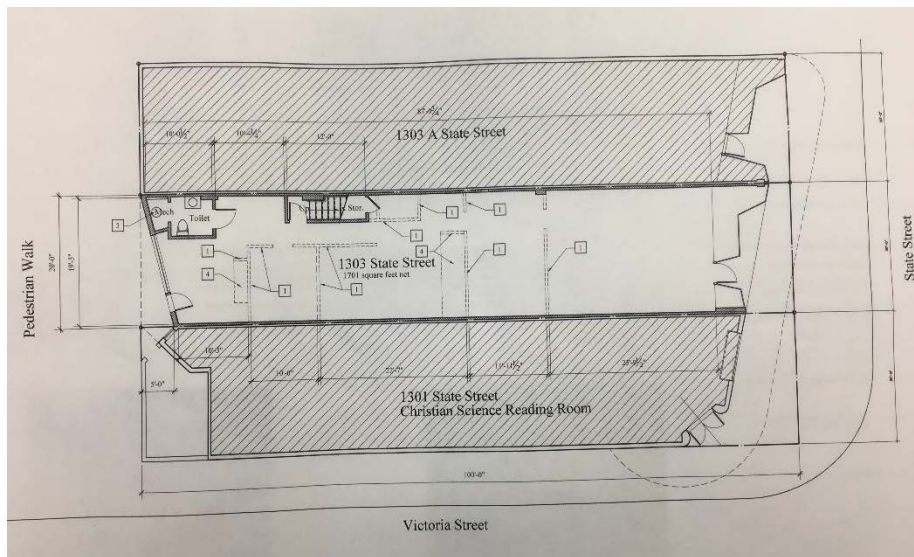
Because the building is important to Santa Barbara's architectural repertoire and meets the City Landmark eligibility criteria for its architectural style and historical significance, it is the opinion of the Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC) Designations Subcommittee that the building is an excellent candidate for City Landmark designation.

Vicinity Map



Vicinity Map, City of Santa Barbara Mapping Analysis and Printing System, 2013

Red line indicates proposed boundary of the City Landmark designation that includes the entire parcel with includes three storefronts.



Above: Site plan showing the building with three storefronts with the rounded awning, rounded corner entrance, and diagonally cut

Historic Context:

In 1950, plans were undertaken to construct the commercial building with three storefronts on the vacant parcels at 1301-1303A State Street. The project was initially listed under one address, 1301 State Street, with three owners. While a number of Modernist style commercial and institutional buildings were built in Southern California during the postwar period, when Modernism enjoyed its greatest popularity (circa-1945-1965), only a handful were built in Santa Barbara. The mid-century streamline Moderne building is rare on State Street in Santa Barbara. Modernist architecture never resonated, to any large degree, in Santa Barbara, particularly with the



early 1920s founding of the Santa Barbara Community Arts Association, which urged that the town identify its individual character as Spanish Colonial Revival and Mediterranean and then use planning principles to develop it. This gem of modern architecture was designed prior to the establishment of the El Pueblo Viejo Landmark District. The creation of El Pueblo Viejo Landmark District ordinance that centered around 16 blocks of the Presidio and the advisory Landmark Committee that aided in review for the new district was not established until 1960. The El Pueblo Viejo Landmark District gradually expanded with its mandate Spanish Colonial Revival, Mission or Mediterranean style architecture with in the district.

Architect

Kem Weber (1889-1963):

The following narrative is an excerpt from the 2010 HSSR by Pam Post and Tim Hazeltine.

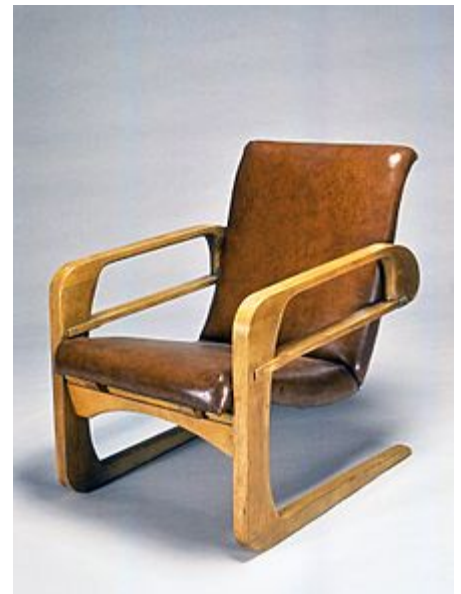
Renowned as an industrial and interior designer, Kem Weber was recognized by the influential architectural critics, Sheldon and Martha Cheney, in their book, *Art and the Machine* (1936), “as the first West Coast designer to bring a tradition free, machine-age creativeness to American interior design” (Helfrich: 2001, n.p.). Born Karl Emanuel Martin Weber in Berlin, Germany, in 1889, Weber’s initial training came in 1908 when he attended the School of Decorative Arts, in Berlin (Kem is an acronym for his three given names).

In 1918, Weber moved to Santa Barbara. Opening a design studio in the nineteenth century Covarrubias adobe he taught art classes at the Santa Barbara School of Arts before moving to Los Angeles in 1921 to work for Barker Brothers; the prestigious furniture store hired Weber to design a new line of modish and avant-garde furniture. Three years later Weber was appointed their art director, responsible for furniture design, store displays, and packaging (in that same year, 1924, he became a United States citizen). In 1925, Weber traveled to Europe, where, invigorated by the ideas of the European Modernists, he developed a line of furniture and decorative objects based on the machine aesthetic. A year later Weber’s fashionable designs became the focal point of Barkers’ ‘Modes and Manners’ shop. By the late 1920s Weber had opened his own industrial design studio in Hollywood. From this point on he worked independently.

By the 1930s, like a number of other avant-garde Modernists, Weber, already drawn to the ideals of the machine aesthetic and the mass-produced object, turned to principles of the Streamlined Moderne style. With its rounded corners and obliteration of right angles, the style implied speed and forward movement. “Employing new materials like aluminum, chrome, rubber and plastics, the Streamlined Moderne optimistically embraced the potential of technology to create a total design approach” (Helfrich: 2001, n.p.). For Weber, this translated into designs for clients such as the Lawson Clock Company (1934),



Above: One of the unique chairs designed by Kem Weber, internationally renowned furniture designer. Photo courtesy of Pinterest.



Above: The “airline chair” designed by Kem Weber in 1934-35. Now housed at the Brooklyn Museum.

the biomorphic shape of the 'Airline' chair (1934-35), the steel tubular furniture for the Lloyd Manufacturing Company (1934) and the residential architecture of houses like the W. E. Bixby residence (1936-37). Despite the harsh economic times of the Depression years, Weber continued to enjoy a productive and successful professional life. A man of varied interests, he pursued an eclectic career as an industrial designer of furniture, decorative objects, and industrial products, as well designing houses and at least one commercial building. By the 1930s he was recognized as one of the world's leading industrial designers.

In 1945, Weber returned to Santa Barbara with the intention of going into semi-retirement. Initially, he and his wife, Erika, lived at 270 West Alamar Street (City Directory, 1946). Three years later, in 1949, the couple moved to 1111 Mission Canyon Road, where he built an artist's studio; several years later he designed a house for the property (City Directory, 1949). While Weber had ceased almost entirely his work as an industrial designer, he continued to accept both residential and non-residential architectural commissions. By the mid-1940s his residential designs had abandoned "the Streamlined Moderne style for a personal version of the woodsy Bay area mode" (Gebhard & Von Breton: 1969, 44). Some of his Santa Barbara residential commissions during this period included, among others, the DeWitt house (1946), a house at 1451 Orange Grove Avenue (1947), the Weber house (1952), and the Wakefield house, 1955. Unlike his residential designs, however, his commercial work continued to reflect his prewar industrial aesthetic, including his design for the buildings at 1301-1303A State Street, which continued to demonstrate his commitment to Modernism. In 1963, eight years after the completion of his last residential commission, the Wakefield house, Weber died in Santa Barbara.

The Streamline Moderne Style:

Streamline Moderne was prevalent from 1930-1945. In stylistic terms, Streamline Moderne represents the last phase of Art Deco. Whereas Art Deco is concerned with surface ornament, color, and abstractions of natural forms applied as decoration on buildings, Streamline Moderne is essentially a machine aesthetic focused on mass production, functional efficiency, and a more abstract aesthetic coming from the Bauhaus in Germany and the “white architecture” of Europe: the International Style. As the world was transitioning from the exuberance and richness of the “Roaring Twenties” and into the grips of austerity and self-discipline of Depression-era 1930s, the high-style architects were pushed aside in favor of industrial designers.

These designers began to favor simpler, aerodynamic lines and forms in the modeling of ships, airplanes, and automobiles. In the modern machine age, smooth surfaces, curved corners, and an emphasis on horizontal lines gave the feeling that airstreams could move smoothly over and under them. This streamline aesthetic was put in service of everyday objects and activities of a democratic society: fast food, cheap travel, appliances, and the automobile. Roadside diners, motor hotels, cinemas, early strip malls and shopping centers, seaside marinas, and air and bus terminals all borrowed forms and profiles from the designs of railway trains, ship hulls and ocean liners, airplane fuselages, and the latest coupes and sedans.



Above: *The curved canted canopy with aluminum trim, brushed concrete walls, and angled storefronts are characteristics of the Streamline Moderne style.*

Without a doubt, prominent expositions and fairs during the 1930s in the U.S. were major advocates and proponents of Streamline Moderne, and they helped to spread the taste and preference for the style. These were the Chicago’s Century of Progress World’s Fair of 1933-34, Dallas’ Centennial Exhibition of 1936, the New York World’s Fair of 1939-40, and the San Francisco Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939.

The Kem Weber building has the following character-defining features of a Streamline Moderne building: a curved, corner-facing entrance with glazed set of doors; Streamline Moderne style neon signage that follows the curve of the integrated canopy, a the horizontal vector line created by the canopy trimmed with aluminum; the solid stucco-clad parapet that extends the length of the State Street façade; the one-story front elevation with horizontal emphasis; the white predominant color; exposed brushed concrete; and stepped, diagonal-cut, aluminum framed windows and doors.

The Streamline Modern style neon signage reads “Christian Science Reading Room” and is original to the building. Historic signs give continuity to public spaces, becoming part of the community memory. Signs reflect trends in architecture and technology as seen in the Modern lettering and the use of neon in this sign. Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners—or from many vantage points across the city—for a long time. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as vehicles of information, as identifiers of something else. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layers of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons as this one has become on the corner of State and Victoria Streets.

In contrast to the first floor of the building, the rear upper story is clad in stucco rather than brushed concrete of the street façade. It features a side gable roof clad in terra cotta tiles. The rear elevation of the Kem Weber building faces a pedestrian paseo linking West Victoria Street to the Arlington Theatre, is the most referential to the Spanish Colonial Revival style, and was most likely designed to be compatible to the Arlington. While Weber’s scheme acknowledges the nearby Spanish Colonial Revival style buildings in his design of the recessed second floor and the use of stucco cladding on a portion of the south and west elevations, these elements are subservient to the Modernist vocabulary of the curving street façade of the building.

Significance:

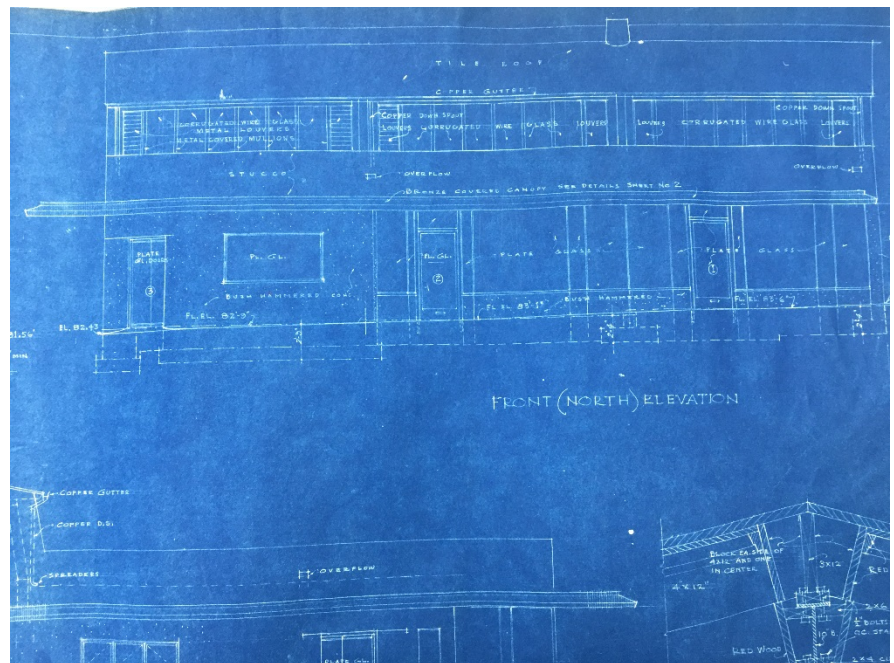
The City of Santa Barbara defines historic significance as outlined by the Municipal Code, Section 22.22.040. It is the opinion of the Historic Landmarks Commission Designations Subcommittee that the Kem Weber building is an excellent candidate for City Landmark designation per the following six criteria:

Criterion A. Its character, interest or value as a significant part of the heritage of the City, the State or the Nation

Designed by noted designer Kem Weber and architect, Roy Cheesman in 1950, the building is a postwar interpretation of the Streamline Moderne style. Completed in 1951, the building complex was Weber’s last commercial commission. It is the only example in Santa Barbara of his postwar commercial work. Exemplary of the Streamline Moderne style, it is an important and rare example of Modernism in Santa Barbara.

Criterion D. Its exemplification of a particular architectural style or way of life important to the City, the State, or the Nation

The Kem Weber building represents a rare postwar example of the Streamline Moderne in Santa Barbara. The building has the character-defining features of the Streamline Moderne style,



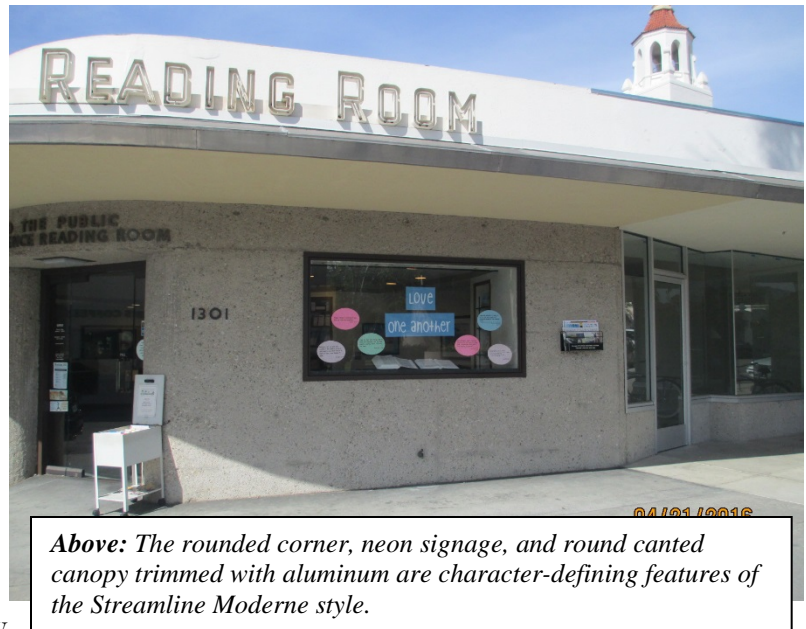
including a reductive, minimalist scheme; curvilinear façade and canopy; and industrial style building materials.

Criterion E. Its exemplification of the best remaining architectural type in a neighborhood

The building is the only example of Streamline Moderne style architecture on State Street and one of few in the City of Santa Barbara.

Criterion F. Its identification as the creation, design or work of a person or persons whose effort has significantly influenced the heritage of the City, the State or the Nation

The building was designed by the internationally renowned industrial and interior designer Kem Weber, one of the few Modernists to successfully practice in Santa Barbara. Weber enjoyed an international reputation as a purveyor of avant garde design. The reductive quality of Weber's scheme for the State Street building typifies his preference for the machine aesthetic in the postwar period.



Above: The rounded corner, neon signage, and round canted canopy trimmed with aluminum are character-defining features of the Streamline Moderne style.

Criterion G. Its embodiment of elements demonstrating outstanding attention to architectural design, detail, materials and craftsmanship

The Kem Weber building employs brushed concrete walls, neon signage, aluminum-framed windows and doors, a curving canopy and corner that are excellent examples of mid-twentieth-century Modernist commercial design and attention to detail.

Criterion I. Its unique location or singular physical characteristic representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood

As a unique and singular example of Streamline Moderne style architecture on the prominent corner lot of State and Victoria Streets in Santa Barbara, the Kem Weber building has been a familiar visual feature of the neighborhood since 1951. The original neon signage reading "Christian Science Reading Room" is a familiar characteristic that establishes the familiar feature of the neighborhood.

Historic Integrity:

Integrity is the ability of a property to convey its original appearance. There are essential physical features that must be considered to evaluate the integrity of a significant building. The exterior of the building has undergone no significant alterations since its construction. It has retained almost all of its original fabric and most of its architectural detailing. The building has undergone relatively few alterations, and with the exception of the removal of a detached planter in front of the building at 1301 State Street, the three buildings still reflect their original plan and design. Because the building retains its integrity of location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship, it can convey the post-World War II period in which it was built. Thus, the building has retained a high level of historical integrity.

Recommendation:

The HLC Designations Subcommittee and staff recommend that the HLC adopt a resolution to recommend to City Council that the Kem Weber building be designated as a City Landmark. Staff recommends the proposed boundary of the City Landmark designation include the entire parcel as it runs lot line to lot line. The original neon signage is a character-defining feature of the building.

Works Cited:

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Post/Hazeltine Associates. "Historic Structures Sites Report for 1303 State Street." August 20, 2010.